

San Diego Downtown News

Panel weighs in on private funding for Balboa Park

by Adam Elder
February 01, 2007

When speaking of public lands, sometimes the word “privatization” is all it takes to get people’s attentions. This was exactly the basis of a discussion on the future of Balboa Park on Jan. 25, held by local organization Citizens Coordinate for Century 3 (C3).

With an annual \$14 million operating budget, cut approximately in half since 1997, the park is seemingly at a crossroads. Recent findings of a report by the Legler Benbough Foundation, which provides funding to many of the park’s institutions, cited Balboa Park’s modest reliance on private funds compared with that for Central Park and Prospect Park in New York City, Forest Park in St. Louis, Piedmont Park in Atlanta and Herman Park in Houston. These parks are funded by substantial public-private partnerships.

Yet, while Balboa Park was named as the most “efficient” park per employee in numerous national surveys, according to David Lang, executive director of the Balboa Park Cultural Partnership, the current budget doesn’t take into account such things as maintenance of “buildings that weren’t meant to last,” as District 3 Councilwoman Toni Atkins said, beyond the 1915-16 Panama-California Exposition for which they were designed. Additionally, the park is around \$100 million short for unfunded repairs.

Thus, the almost necessary infusion of private funds and its subsequent implications was enough to generate a public discussion.

Atkins stressed that Mayor Sanders’ recent comments on public-private partnerships for Balboa Park were not to be taken as an official stance.

“[The mayor] has had a lot on his plate,” said Atkins. “So someone comes forward with an idea, and the mayor says, ‘I think we should look at that.’ And the next thing you know, there’s an article in the paper about Balboa Park becoming a conservancy and privatization. Well, this is not how that’s going to work.”

Atkins said she wants to look at the data and how San Diego can emulate other cities in improving the park’s governance, strategic approach and identifying its needs while still keeping it accessible.

“This is not necessarily a discussion about privatization, it’s about looking at existing models and trying to determine how we would approach that here in our own city with our own system’s given input,” Atkins said. She added that any action should have assurances that the public’s interests are protected, that the park continues its outreach to underserved communities and that all stakeholders are heard during the discussion.

Atkins stated that any shift toward accumulation of private funding shouldn't take away the city's responsibility toward the park.

Mike Stepner, longtime city planner and now part of the Stepner Design Group, urged caution in flirting with a private partnership.

"We have a tendency in this state that if we get somebody else to pay the bills, we stop paying our fair share of the cost of operations," said Stepner.

He said the city is falling further behind in its provision of funds for parks and public space, and he asserted that this very public space attracts businesses to a city – a priority often more important on the list of city planners.

"Efficiency is a word we should never use when it comes to quality of life issues," Stepner said. "Effectiveness is the word we really want to take into account."

Stepner renewed calls for redevelopment opportunities in Balboa Park. Those include the 20th and B service yard, for which park officials now have a price on redeveloping; the Arizona Street landfill; and perhaps rethinking the golf course and portions of it for park purposes.

Lang, head of a program that allows for Balboa Park's institutions to work together and make more effective use of limited resources, asserted that Balboa Park has in fact been a public-private partnership for more than 100 years.

"The goal is to make the best use of what is currently a public-private partnership and begin a dialogue that does a thorough analysis of what are the issues, what are the problems that we're looking at and are there other ways to address those now and going forward that would work better than what we currently have as a framework of governance," Lang said.

Former C3 president Don Wood suggested that some of the money supposedly allocated for park funds in the last Transit Occupancy Tax raise of one cent be directed toward the parks, instead of into building Petco Park and plugging a hole in the general fund, for which he suggested it has been used.

On Jan. 29, The Legler Benbough Foundation, along with the Parker Foundation and The San Diego Foundation, announced a collaboration proposing to study and find actual data points concerning future operating and maintenance costs, possible sources of additional revenue and the feasibility of private sector support. The study will commence within several months and is expected to finish later this year.